

Daunting challenges, bold aspirations

ABUL MAAL ABDUL MUHITH

AS partners in the Asian Development Fund (ADF) converge in Dhaka this week to negotiate the Fund's replenishment, it is an opportune time to take stock of our country's progress and the challenges that lie ahead.

The ADF is a source of concessional development financing funded by member countries of the Asian Development Bank. ADF financing is provided to low-income countries only and some of them are eligible for financing from both ADF and Ordinary Capital Resources (OCR).

Bangladesh used to receive only ADF financing but since 1999, it gets financing from both sources. ADF has played a major role in Bangladesh's economic and social development. With this, and other official development assistance, Bangladesh has made major gains in economic growth and poverty reduction. In the past decade, our Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has grown by an annual average of 6%. In the past five years, poverty has declined from 40% to 31.5% of the population. Since independence in 1971, Bangladesh has tripled the production of food grains to achieve near self-sufficiency in normal production years. The economy today is more flexible and resilient, as indicated by its ability to withstand the global financial crisis with minimum adverse effects. Bangladesh is also now more capable of handling many natural disasters to which the country is so susceptible.

Bangladesh has also made the transition to a mixed economy adopting market economic policies while maintaining the government's critical role in providing public goods, and expanding social protection to ensure broad-based and inclusive socioeconomic development. This approach has helped balanced growth with social justice, focusing on the need for reaping the benefits of market economy with that of govern-

ment interventions to protect social interests and provide an equitable social environment. Bangladesh is a nation of impossible attainments and great resilience, and in this pursuit it acknowledges the support of all its development partners.

While the private sector has flourished with the hard work of low paid labour, intelligent and diligent farmers and innovativeness and devotion of young entrepreneurs; the government has continued to play a major role in the economy through developing basic infrastructure, including road and

other transport facilities, power and gas supplies, rural and urban infrastructure and services, educational and health facilities and other social services. Transition to a market economy and the government's commitment to inclusive economic growth were accompanied by careful management of macroeconomic stability, sustained infrastructure development, expanded human resource development, promotion of gender equality, growth and diversification in agriculture and introduction of an improved social security system. The ADF made important contributions to this process. However, foreign direct investment (FDI) has not been forthcoming in Bangladesh mainly due to an image prob-

lem. The FDI regime is very good, the cost of doing business is going down, red tape and bureaucratic sloth are slowly being overcome. Hopefully such developments will be fruitful in the near future.

ADF financing was also very effective in rebuilding infrastructure following several devastating floods and cyclones. The emergency assistance repaired flood embankments, and helped reopen roads and bridges to restore economic activity and access to markets, hospitals, and schools. More recently, ADF assistance in 2008 and 2009 helped Bangladesh overcome the impact of the global economic crisis and implement public policy reforms. This assistance stimulated Bangladesh's economic recovery while strengthening the

country's social safety net programmes. It also helped cushion the impact of the crisis on the poor and vulnerable while maintaining macroeconomic stability.

Today, we continue to make significant progress in socioeconomic development, even in the face of the continuing global economic downturn. GDP growth, for example, was 6.7% in fiscal year 2011 and is forecast to average 7.3% from 2012 to 2015. But with an estimated 47 million of our citizens living in poverty, and inadequate access

for the poor to

finance, education, health care, water and sanitation, we still face enormous challenges. Like many developing countries across the Asia and Pacific region, Bangladesh has an unfinished development agenda; much more needs to be done to make growth more inclusive, and to accelerate progress towards achieving the millennium development goals (MDGs), eradicating poverty, and raising the quality of life for all citizens and above all establishing a Digital Bangladesh. We are one of the worst victims of climate change and need both financial and technological support there. We also face some immediate crises but that is normal in the development process as long as you are up and doing. We have

balance of payment crisis in an expansionary economy. We are very vulnerable to global food and fuel price hikes. We have a problem with subsidy bill as we try to reduce the difficulties of the poor and the deprived and rapidly accelerate power supply.

The key objective of the Government of Bangladesh is to achieve faster economic growth but ensure that it is simultaneously inclusive. We have chosen ICT development as a means as also an end in our development objectives. This would require a large number of job opportunities to be created and regionally balanced economic development needs to be ensured. We need huge investment and both concessionary assistance and FDI are urgent. We need to remove the large infrastructure deficits, create massive employment opportunities, strengthen public service deliveries, ensure rapid development of human resources and address issues of governance and climate change. The continued support of the international community, including through the ADF, is essential if we are to effectively address these challenges and pave the way for Bangladesh to be a peaceful and prosperous country by 2021.

Indeed, it is our hope that ADF will contribute even more to fostering rapid socioeconomic development and reducing poverty in Bangladesh, as well as in other ADF-recipient countries. We are proud to host ADF delegates this week, and to showcase the achievements of our country and our people -- achievements made possible through hard work and dedication of its people accompanied by the generous support of development partners. A successful replenishment of the Fund will ensure that Bangladesh can continue to build on this progress and, most importantly, bring meaningful change in the lives of its poorest citizens.

The writer is Minister for Finance, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh.



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Israel is unlikely to respond to Iranian provocation

MAHMOOD ELAHI

I am writing with reference to Op-Ed: "The real lesson of Iraq," by Prof. Malfrid Braut-Hegghammer, Norwegian Defence University College, Oslo (Dec. 4).

Before drawing any analogy with Israel's pre-emptive strike on Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor, it should be clear from Iran's acts and rhetoric that the Shia leaders are trying to provoke Israel to attack it. The leaders want a war to bolster their foundering public support in the wake of the rigged election. A vast majority of Iranian people must be watching the popular revolt against Syrian dictator Bashar Assad, whose collapse might spill over to Iran, threatening the Iranian regime. So a war with Israel will come handy to rally public support for the regime.

Seen in this light, an Israeli pre-emptive attack

strike on North Korea's nuclear reactors.

Well, North Korea did explode its nuclear device, but nothing happened. Instead of going nuclear, Japan has abandoned nuclear power in the aftermath of Fukushima. Today, North Korea remains a destitute nation, heavily dependent on China for its economic survival. Instead of becoming a threat, it is now a pariah nation. As for North Korea's nuclear threat, Japan knows that the massive nuclear arsenal of the United States will be enough to deter North Korea's tiny nuclear arsenal.

Similarly, a nuclear-armed Iran is likely to become an international pariah. Sunni Arab nations are likely to move closer to the United States to counter Iran's nuclear threat. As for Israel, its massive nuclear arsenal will be enough to deter Iran's minuscule nuclear arsenal. Iranian



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on Iran's nuclear installation will help the Iranian regime to galvanise the Iranian people. The leaders are also aware that being a far away country, Israel cannot invade Iran, while Iran can unleash its Hezbollah surrogates sitting right across Israeli borders. An Israeli air strike on Iran will allow Iran to unleash Hezbollah and Hamas, while blaming Israel for aggression. Instead of destroying Iran's nuclear reactors, Israel will find itself at war on its doorstep.

Instead of Iran, Israel should look at nuclear-armed North Korea. Before North Korea exploded its nuclear device, it was argued that if North Korea was allowed to go nuclear it would destabilise the Asia-Pacific region. To counter North Korea's nuclear capability, Japan would go nuclear, raising China's historical fears about Japan. As a result, we might see a nuclear arms race in the region. To avert such a catastrophe, many neo-conservatives called for pre-emptive

nuclear threat.

However, a non-nuclear war with Israel may go in Iran's favour. It will allow Iran to unleash its surrogates without any fear of Israeli invasion. Thus, it is in Israel's interest not to be provoked by Iran's propaganda. As such, it is highly unlikely that Israel will carry out any Osirak-style pre-emptive strikes on Iran. The biggest beneficiary of any Israeli pre-emptive strike will be Iran's leaders who will be able to bolster their plunging popularity by rallying the Iranian people. All atavistic regimes need enemies to survive. Instead of looking at Iran, Israel should look to nuclear-armed destitute North Korea for lesson.

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82nd BIRTH ANNIVERSARY

Remembering S.M. Ali

SYED BADRUL HAQUE

SM. Ali, icon of journalism of our country, was born eighty two-years ago on December 5 in a well known literary family of Sylhet. His is an inspiring portrait of a journalist who decided early in life to devote his intellectual and writing gift to serving the nation.

He made his debut in the early fifties as a reporter of the erstwhile premier English daily, *The Pakistan Observer*, and became known before long for his feature-reportage, "The City We Live In." Later, on his return to Pakistan from England, he served in senior positions in reputed dailies like *The Dawn* in Karachi and *The Pakistan Times* in Lahore, where he also served as a part-time teacher in journalism of the Punjab University. In 1962 he moved to Hong Kong with an assignment with the *Asia Magazine*, which was followed by senior editorial positions with the *Bangkok Post*, *The New Nation* (Singapore) and the *Hong Kong Standard*.

Though S.M. Ali was away from newspaper world for more than a decade since 1975, serving at the Press Foundation of Asia in Hong Kong and Manila and in Unesco as the regional adviser for Asia in Kuala Lumpur, his romance with journalism however remained passionately singular. In late eighties, after his stint as editor of *The Bangladesh Observer*, he launched *The Daily Star* as its founding editor in 1991. And that was the finest hour, the grand finale of his stellar career in journalism spanning over four decades.

Under his able stewardship, the paper caught the eye of discerning readers in no time, its readership continued to soar along with its innovative accomplishments. Not the straitjacket of party-leaning newspaper *The Daily Star* remained steadfast to professional ethics of objectivity.

S.M. Ali's novel, *Rainbow Over Padma* is flushed with patriotic fervour. Humanity is never in doubt in his works. He extols the people as the real heroes of Bangladesh. Beyond the terrifying spectre that haunts every socio-political treatise of a liberation war and also the desperate sociology of the society, the writer in his prescience finds in our down-trodden people a promise of a new Bangladesh where they would be lifted out of the indebtedness and poverty-cycle and live with human dignity. Surely, no one needs a past riddle with humiliation of colonial rule when the future promises a turning of tables.

He wrote with a narrative drive and an ability to capture situations that make us turn the pages with eager anticipation. The cost of excellence in his writing is his personal devotion and the pain taken. The book is a strong addition to the genre of fictional work on our nation's resurgence in the aftermath of a grueling war of independence. The book was published in Dhaka posthumously in 1994. Another book by him, *After The Dark Night*, was published by the Thompson Press (India) 1974.

The esteem in which he was held as a journalist-writer was evident when the Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos addressed him as Dr. Ali when



the latter called on him at his presidential palace in Manila. Taken aback, he informed the president that he had not been conferred such degree. In reply, the President said: "If your writings were any measure, you had already earned the degree much earlier than now."

S.M. Ali was always keen to share his professional expertise with the young aspirants who wanted to make a career in journalism. I received a two-page typed letter from him, which was quite a booster to my morale in charting out my future career at a vital cross-road in my life. In it, he, inter-alia, counseled me to cultivate the habit of writing vigorously -- a vital ingredient for a career in journalism. He, however, cautioned me not to nurse any illusion about journalism. "Life in journalism is too hard for most of us. Often it may seem almost unbearable," he wrote. His was indeed a realistic appraisal of the situation prevailing then in our nascent newspaper industry when the profession obviously did not belong to faint hearts. Yet there were young aspirants who took courage to face the challenge. To many, it's a thrill apart, the moving urge to join the profession was its unique role to serve the society from a "vantage point."

Evidently we have moved so quickly to the sordidness of the present moment because the traditional deference the pioneering elders once received has almost entirely disappeared. S.M. Ali, beholden to their legacies, wrote excellent pieces in *The Daily Star* on Altaf Hossain and Abdus Salam, the two outstanding editors of his time, recalling their memorable contribution to journalism, nay to the nation.

S.M. Ali was essentially a kindly and good humoured man who never lost his disarming wit. In his popular column "My World" in *The Daily Star* S.M. Ali wished that the books he received from writers were put on sale after he was gone. One may, however, fervently hope that those books, if not already sold away, were preserved with care as an epitaph to the hallowed memory of the late lamented editor.

Our tribute in spades.

The writer is a contributor to *The Daily Star*.